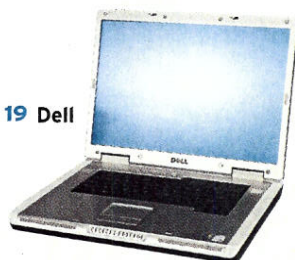


7 Dell



19 Dell



CR Quick Recommendations

The **Ratings** on the facing page rank laptop computers by test results and features. **Quick Picks** also takes into account brand reliability, tech support, and value.

QUICK PICKS

Best inexpensive laptop:

7 Dell \$560, CR Best Buy

A great choice for a rudimentary laptop or a second PC.

Best if you want more features and performance in a laptop:

1 Gateway \$1,025

2 Toshiba \$935

11 Dell \$1,060

12 HP \$1,060

The Gateway and Toshiba were the best-performing budget systems in our tests. The Dell and HP machines performed equally well in the workhorse category, and both represent good values.

Best desktop replacements:

17 Apple \$2,800

19 Dell \$1,365

20 HP \$1,200

The Apple shines, with great design, display, and performance. The Dell's design and features were very good, while the HP is better for gaming.

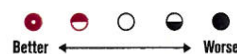
Best lightweight laptop:

25 Sony \$1,630

Excellent performance and best features set of all the slim-and-light models. The Sony is a good choice for business travelers who want a lot of power in a very portable package.

Ratings

computer stores



Within types, in performance order. **Blue** key numbers indicate Quick Picks.

	Computer store	Reader score	Survey results	Return policy	Major brands sold
Key number			Selection Service Price Web site Days	Restock fees	Apple Averatec Compaq Dell eMachines Gateway HP Lenovo Sony Toshiba
MANUFACTURER DIRECT By Web or phone. Allows configuration of models.					
1 Apple		93	● ● ● ● ●	14	●
2 Lenovo (IBM)		85	● ● ● ● ●	21	●
3 Compaq/HP		84	● ● ● ● ●	21	●
4 Dell		83	● ● ● ● ●	21	●
5 Sony		82	● ● ● ● ●	30	●
6 Toshiba		81	● ● ● ● ●	15	●
7 Gateway		79	● ● ● ● ●	15	●
RETAIL WEB SITE/CATALOG Some allow no configuration of models.					
8 Amazon.com		90	● ● ● ● ●	30 (1)	● ● ● ● ●
9 PC/Mac Connection.com		90	● ● ● ● ●	30 (2)	● ● ● ● ●
10 Costco.com		87	● ● ● ● ●	6 mo.	● ● ● ● ●
11 CDW.com		87	● ● ● ● ●	30 (2)	● ● ● ● ●
12 TigerDirect.com		84	● ● ● ● ●	30 (2)	● ● ● ● ●
13 PC/MacMall.com		84	● ● ● ● ●	15 (2)	● ● ● ● ●
14 Best Buy.com		81	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
15 Circuit City.com		80	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
RETAIL STORE Some allow no configuration of models.					
16 Apple store		90	● ● ● ● ●	14	●
17 Micro Center		81	● ● ● ● ●	30/7 (3)	● ● ● ● ●
18 Dell kiosk		81	● ● ● ● ●	21	●
19 Costco		81	● ● ● ● ●	6 mo.	● ● ● ● ●
20 Sam's Club		79	● ● ● ● ●	6 mo.	● ● ● ● ●
21 Office Depot		79	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
22 Staples		78	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
23 OfficeMax		77	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
24 Circuit City		76	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
25 Best Buy		76	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
26 CompUSA		76	● ● ● ● ●	14	● ● ● ● ●
27 Fry's Electronics		76	● ● ● ● ●	30/15 (3)	● ● ● ● ●
28 Wal-Mart		71	● ● ● ● ●	15	● ● ● ● ●
TV SHOPPING NETWORK Allows no configuration of models.					
29 QVC		84	● ● ● ● ●	30	● ● ● ● ●
30 HSN		81	● ● ● ● ●	30	● ● ● ● ●

(1) Policies of third-party vendors vary. (2) Certain brands nonreturnable. (3) Desktops/laptops.

Guide to the Survey

Ratings are based on 81,941 responses from CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers who completed the Computer Shopping Survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, covering home computers purchased new from January 2005 through June 2006. **Reader score** is based on the respondents' satisfaction with their purchase experience. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied; 80 would mean very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of less than 4 points are not meaningful. **Survey results** reflect how each vendor did in comparison with the average of all others. Respondents rated vendors on their **selection** of computers, **service** (including knowledge and helpfulness of staff), **prices**, and **Web site** usability. Service was rated only by those who bought computers in a store or phoned or e-mailed the vendor. Under **return policy**, **restock fee** indicates those stores that charge a percentage of the purchase price to return a computer; details vary. **Major brands sold** might not include all brands for sale. Subscribers may not be representative of the general population. A "—" indicates insufficient data or not applicable.



Consumer Reports®

SMALL SUVs

- Acura RDX
- BMW X3
- Jeep Wrangler
- Mazda CX-7
- Toyota FJ Cruiser



JANUARY 2007

EXPERT • INDEPENDENT • NONPROFIT

www.ConsumerReports.org

UNBIASED
RATINGS
236
PRODUCTS

Shopping online

Safer ways to pay

Wrinkle creams that work (sort of)

The low-cost jar that beats the \$335 luxury cream



Washers & dryers

Dirty secrets of the new energy labels

Best laundry detergents

PLUS

- Nike + iPod kit
- Binoculars

BEST CELL-PHONE DEALS

PLUS
Beat the 10 worst cell-phone rip-offs

- Which service is really **RELIABLE**
- Easy ways to **CUT YOUR BILL**
- **TOP PICKS** among 44 new phones tested
- Smart buys in **SMART PHONES**



Computers

Waiting for Vista, the OS that may steal Christmas

Don't expect to find a computer loaded with Vista, Microsoft's first major new Windows version in five years, in your pile of holiday gifts this year. Thanks to Microsoft's post-New Year's release date, holiday shoppers looking for a Windows PC face a dilemma. If you buy now but want Vista, you must upgrade later, possibly at extra cost. To get a PC with Vista installed, you must wait until early 2007.

If you must buy now, such as for a gift or tax write-off, here are ways to reduce the costs and hassles of upgrading later:

Look for a deal. As the year ends, prices on non-Vista PCs are falling, as retailers try to drive holiday sales.

Check the specs. Choose a configuration based on the Vista version you'll want to run. Look for either a Windows Vista Capable or Premium Ready logo. The former provides enough power to run the Basic version of Vista, while the latter lets you effectively run higher-end Vista versions—Home Premium and Ultimate. Although Microsoft recommends just 512MB of RAM for Vista Capable systems, we suggest you buy at least 1GB.

Follow the right upgrade path. If you must buy before 2007, and want to upgrade to Vista later, buy a system running Windows Media Center Edition as the operating system. This version of Windows XP provides the easiest upgrade path to Vista Home Premium, the

sweet spot among the three Vista editions for home users. Vista Basic leaves out many of the operating system's best features. Ultimate is costlier, with more features than most home users need.

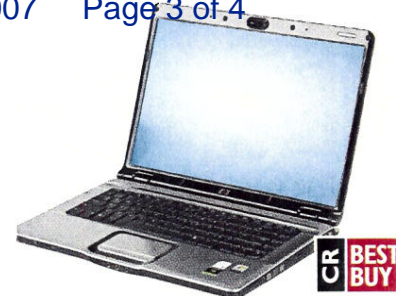
Participate in the coupon program. Manufacturers and dealers are offering coupons for Vista upgrades to those who buy computers from now to mid-March. The deal you get will depend on the system you buy. Some manufacturers are offering a free upgrade, while others charge an upgrade fee of \$49 to \$79.

If you can postpone buying, or are unsure about Vista, consider these points:

Look before you leap to an upgrade. It's not always easy to upgrade to a new operating system. You may need to resolve software incompatibilities, upgrade security software, or install drivers. Those may be reason enough to stick with XP.

Vista offers a lot. Based on our early looks at prerelease versions, Vista provides better photo editing and organizing capabilities than XP, parental controls, and an updated user interface. Microsoft is also touting Vista's improved security, though we haven't tested that yet.

Consider a Mac. Buying a Macintosh will get you a brand that excels in both technical support and reliability. But it won't sidestep the operating system dilemma entirely, because Apple plans an upgrade to its operating system, OS X, in spring 2007, which will most likely require an upgrade cost of \$100 to \$200.



1 HP \$645



2 Dell \$900



LAPTOP COMPUTERS

The HP includes 512MB of RAM; the others have 1GB of RAM. The HP and Dell E1505 have 15-inch screens; the E1705 has a 17-inch display.

Best 15.4-inch budget model:

1 HP Pavilion dv6000z \$645, CR Best Buy
Good performance across the board. Weighs 6.1 pounds. Battery life: 2 hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

For more features and performance:

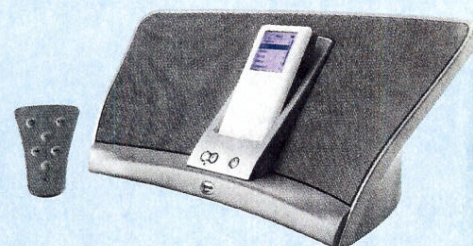
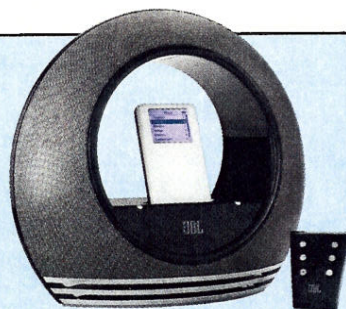
2 Dell Inspiron E1505 \$900, CR Best Buy
Excellent speed, very good multimedia features, and good ergonomics and display. Weighs 6.6 pounds. Battery life: 3¼ hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

Best desktop replacement:

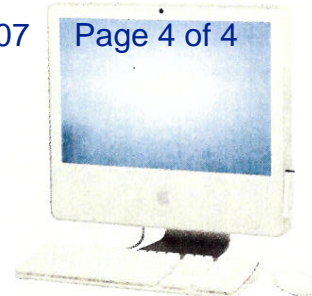
3 Dell Inspiron E1705 \$1,240
Excellent speed, very good multimedia features, and very good ergonomics. Weighs 7.7 pounds. Battery life: 3¼ hours. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

iPod boom boxes

We tested six powered speaker systems with docks that accommodate all iPod models. These three reproduced sound most accurately. The JBL had the most features, including a USB port and a video output. The Klipsch's dock supports any size iPod without adapters. The Bose was the single most accurate model but lacks a line input.



JBL Radial, \$300; Klipsch iGroove, \$250; Bose SoundDock (not shown), \$300.

**3 Dell** \$1,240**6 Gateway** \$1,080**8 Apple** \$1,500**4 HP** \$605**7 Dell** \$870**10 Gateway** \$2,035

DESKTOP COMPUTERS

Budget models include 512MB of RAM; others have 1GB. Except for the Apple, prices do not include monitors.

Budget models:

4 HP Pavilion s7600e \$605

Slim case; very good speed and ergonomics; not upgradeable. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

5 Dell Dimension E521 \$450

Great price; very good speed, ergonomics, expandability. Fair 3D gaming, speakers. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

Best overall performer:

6 Gateway DX420S \$1,080

Top performer among all desktops; excellent speed, 3D gaming. Tech support and reliability are undistinguished.

For more features and performance:

7 Dell Dimension E520 \$870 CR Best Buy

Lowest-priced workhorse. Excellent speed; very good features and ergonomics. Tech support and reliability are undistinguished.

8 Apple iMac 20-inch \$1,500

Sharp, 20-inch screen. Excellent speed; very good features, ergonomics. Apple's desktops have proven very reliable, and its tech support superior.

GAMING COMPUTERS

Dell, Gateway, and HP are offering souped-up systems for gamers. Specialty brands like Alienware and Velocity Micro cater to gamers, with options such as liquid cooling and a wider selection of components. These systems are costlier than Dell and Gateway computers, even for similarly configured models. For the extra money, what you're getting is mainly style. A new graphics standard, due with Windows Vista, will render obsolete the video cards currently in these systems. If you must buy one now to upgrade later, prepare to spend \$300 for a new card.

Best models from traditional manufacturers:

9 Dell XPS 410 \$2,215

Top performer; most robust features; plenty of room to customize. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

10 Gateway FX510XG \$2,035 CR Best Buy

More traditionally styled; very good to excellent performer. Tech support and reliability undistinguished.

Best specialty model:

11 Velocity Micro Gamers Edge PCX \$2,730

Colorful case has blinking LEDs and transparent side. Noisy. Sparse documentation. Very good to excellent performer. Tech support and reliability are unknown for this brand.

Headphones

We tested over-the-ear headphones, which generally offer better sound quality for serious listening. The Grado headphones are comfortable and lightweight, with excellent sound quality and soft ear pads. The Sennheisers use active noise-cancellation technologies to reduce ambient noise—an increasingly popular feature.



Grado SR-60, \$70, CR Best Buy (left), and **Sennheiser PXC 250**, \$150.

For more information

Free: More last-minute gifts. Reviews of the iPod Shuffle, Microsoft Zune, more digital cameras, and other hot gifts at ConsumerReports.org/HolidayGuide.

Free: TV Quick Picks. Our holiday gift guide identifies fine choices in plasmas, LCDs, and more. And our TV Decision Guide walks you through the key considerations when buying a new set.